NOAA Style and Content Guidelines for the World Wide Web:

Section 1: Purpose and Scope

February 1, 1998

1.1 Purpose and Scope of this Document

This document has been created to provide basic guidelines for development of World Wide Web (WWW or "the Web") electronic documents within NOAA. Its development has been motivated by several factors:

- The need for an appropriate visual design protocol for NOAA in order to achieve a corporate "look and feel"
- The desirability of establishing a minimum set of quality control standards for WWW server information
- The necessity for a basic framework for guiding the computer user through the complex body of linked information on NOAA's servers

The document is not intended to spell out detailed style guidelines and standards for developing Web documents. The reader is referred to Section 1.3 for a short list of such guidelines documents and the many others available either on the Web or as printed documents. Rather, the style and content guidelines in this document are intended to identify the basic elements constituting a NOAA corporate presence on the Web.

It is important to recognize that the Web is a rapidly evolving medium both in terms of technological capability and information content. As a result, this document is necessarily transitory in nature and requires periodic review and update in concert with Web evolution.

This document is the product of the NOAA Web Advisory Working Group (NWAWG) which was established as a NOAA-wide entity by the Deputy Under Secretary (DUS) for the purpose of coordinating Web information development across the many elements of the agency.

The World Wide Web has rapidly become a prominent feature of the NOAA communications environment, particularly in the way that we reach the general public. Increasingly, it represents the "front door and welcome lobby" for a wide spectrum of people interested in our organization and its services. This public includes students at every level, educators, researchers, legislators, professionals in related fields, and ordinary citizens interested in the information on myriad topics offered by NOAA on the World Wide Web.

Because it has become such a public place, NOAA's face on the Web now must adequately reflect our organizational identity and how that is expressed in all of our relationships-- internal and external. Today, NOAA's web sites communicate who we are to the rest of the Internet universe. This is an important and rapidly growing element of how people relate to us. And (to emphasize the obvious) the universe of people who connect to us on the Web is extremely important to us.

Users need predictability and structure, with clear functional and graphic continuity among the various components and subsections. Banner graphics, signature icons, button bars, and other graphic devices can be very useful in reinforcing domain identity within subsections of a Web site. A carefully organized NOAA user interface will clarify and reinforce Web site structure, and ease the user's cognitive load in a new and complex Web site.

1.2 Universal Access

A critically important consideration when creating on-line documents is the capability of the intended audience to view the content of the document. Users may be limited by physical disability or by technological limitations of their computer, software, or Internet connectivity. Consequently, it is important to take such considerations into account when designing a Web service. For example, a person with visual impairment will not be able to see a highly graphical rendering of information and, therefore, should be provided with an alternate text description. Similarly, users with low data-rate connectivity to the Internet will have difficulty utilizing information services that are highly dependent on large graphics and animation. This is not to say that we should design to the "least common denominator," but rather that we must provide alternatives that ensure universal access.

An excellent source of information on accessibility issues and guidelines to developing accessible Web pages is available from the World Wide Web Consortium (http://www.w3.org/WAI/)

1.3 Reference Style Guides

Much of the material in this document is based upon other commonly available documents on Web presentation style. The reader is referred to the following for in-depth coverage of the subject matter.

Yale Style Manual

(http://info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/contents.html)

Sun Microsystems

(http://www.sun.com/styleguide/tables/Welcome.html)

World Wide Web Consortium

(http://www.w3.org/pub/WWW/Provider/Style/Overview.html)

NSF/NCSA World Wide Web Federal Consortium

(http://skydive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/cybrary/2/guidelines/)

1.4 Definitions

For the purposes of this document the following definitions apply:

1) "Web page" refers to any logical grouping of electronic text and/or graphical material accessed by the user from a Web server and rendered on his computer monitor by any one of a number of
commercial or public-domain Web browsers.

2) "Home Page" refers to a Web page that is the highest level of a hierarchy of electronic documents accessible by the user with a Web browser. This is sometimes referred to as a "Welcome Page" by some organizations.

3) "Supporting pages" are any Web pages that expand upon the information content of the Home Page and are electronically invoked from the Home Page or from other supporting pages.

1.5 Categorization of Home Pages

In order to minimize restrictions on developers while, at the same time, striving for a NOAA corporate "look and feel," two categories of Home Pages are defined in this document. Requirements and guidelines for Category 1 Home Pages are more constraining than for Category 2--the rationale being that Category 1 pages, taken as a group, define for the public NOAA as an organizational entity whereas Category 2 pages do so to a considerably less extent.

The discussion of style and content guidelines has been divided into two parts:

1) Category 1 Home Page are those Web documents that represent the upper-level pages in NOAA, i.e., NOAA Home Page and LO Home Pages. The requirements for these are more constraining than for Category 2 pages.

2) Category 2 Web pages are those Web documents that describe lower organizational level elements of NOAA, i.e., organizational components within the LOs, special projects, e.g., El Nino Theme Page; or special services, e.g., NOAA Locator. A less constraining set of guidelines apply to Category 2.

1.6 Summary of Minimum Style and Content Elements

The following two sections summarize the minimum set of style and content elements for Categories 1 and 2 Web pages (See Attachment 2 for a sample implementation of a Category 1 home page). More detailed descriptions of these elements are provided in later sections of this document.

1.6.1 Category 1 Pages

1. Header (banner) on first page containing standard NOAA icon, "National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration" spelled out, the name of the organization spelled out, iconic representation of the organization (e.g., NWS icon).

2. HTML title tag that adequately describes the function of the Web document to search engines such as Alta Vista, Yahoo, etc.   Also, the META tag with appropriate keywords should be used to provide information to such search engines.

3. Footer (or link to footer information) on first page, containing postal address and electronic mail address for public access.

4. Each graphic must have an ALT attribute with the associated IMG tag with text that describes the content of the graphic.

5. A brief statement of the mission and function of the office providing the information services.

6. Hyperlinks to each of the other five special high-level home pages or hyperlink to a page that contains those links.

7. Hyperlinks to the NOAA Home Page, NOAA Personnel Locator, and to one or more data and information search engines.

8. Date of last revision of the Web document.

9. URL of the home page.

1.6.2 Category 2 Home Pages

1. Header (banner) on the first page identifying it with the fully spelled out name of the office, project, or function with which it is associated, icon of the major organizational element with which it is associated (e.g., LO).

2. HTML title tag that adequately describes the function of the Web document to search engines such as Alta Vista, Yahoo, etc. The META tag with descriptive keywords should also be used to ensure visibility to such search engines.

3. Footer (or link to footer information) on first page, containing postal address and electronic mail address for public access.

4. Brief description of the function or purpose of the logical aggregation of the Web pages.

5. Identification either in the header or footer of NOAA affiliation.

6. Hyperlinks to NOAA Home Page and LO Home page (for multiple-LO sponsored activities, hyperlinks to each of the participating LO Home Pages).

7. Date of last revision of the electronic document.

8. URL of the home page.

1.7 Summary of Desirable Non-Mandatory Content for Web Documents

The following list identifies elements of NOAA Web documents that are desirable, but not mandatory, to include. A more detailed description of these is provided in later sections.

1. Name and method of contact for individual(s) responsible for the Web document.

2. ALT attribute to the IMG tag to support text-only viewing.

3. Map of or written directions to organization sponsoring the Web pages.

4. HTML form allowing users to enter comments.

5. Hyperlinks to NOAA Locator and to NOAA Public Affairs Home Page.

6. List of frequently asked questions (FAQ).

7. Link to an acronym list.